

A Push for Peace in Korea

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Another piece of cold war orthodoxy yielded Tuesday when President Roh Tae Woo of South Korea took the podium at the United Nations. It marked the first time that the leader of South Korea, the only country the U.N. ever went to war to protect, has ever addressed that body. And Mr. Roh used the occasion to launch a courageous and creative diplomatic proposal to bring peace to his peninsula, an effort worthy of the strides he has made toward democracy at home.

North and South Korea, each without a U.N. seat and with armies among the world's largest, glare across the line that has divided them since 1950. Nowhere except in Germany do East and West face each other so directly and dangerously. Mr. Roh now wants to talk peace with his neighbor and asks the help of the great powers.

His strides toward democracy were anything but assured when he took office last February after his nation's first free elections in almost 20 years. A military man, he'd been responsible for many of his party's recent reforms, but for many of its less savory aspects, too. How would he handle this

economic giant that was still a political midget?

He answered by leading his country in successfully hosting the 1988 Olympics and by making unmistakable progress toward democracy and human rights. Thus bolstered, Mr. Roh came to the U.N. to plead his case for a conference among the two Koreas and the powers that back them: the U.S. and Japan, the Soviet Union and China.

There have been almost as many false starts at resolving this issue as there have been bitter accusations, shootings and assassinations throughout the tenuous truce. North Korea's Foreign Minister, also speaking at the U.N., gave only a brittle if slightly conciliatory response to Mr. Roh.

Still, there is movement. Moscow and Beijing have been pressing Pyongyang's fanatic leadership toward reason. And Seoul, now a Western economic eminence, is reaching out to the Communist world. At home, Mr. Roh has held himself open to learning from those who pressed for political freedom, and Korea has benefited. Now he calls on friend and adversary alike to help in the search for peace. In both endeavors, he deserves full support.